America's Best Community Colleges

Why they're better than some of the "best" four-year universities

By Kevin Carey

In the higher education family, community colleges are typically regarded as the poor cousins. Big college guides like *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Princeton Review* devote few, if any, of their glossy pages to community colleges, while reporters and pundits for elite publications have little to say about them as well.

Part of this is pure snobbery. Many of those who create and cover the mainstream college guides attended prestigious four-year schools—which helps to explain the annual preoccupation with whether Harvard or Princeton made the top of the list.

Part of it is also economics. The commercial guides don't have a market incentive to delve into the differences between hundreds of community colleges, because most students don't shop for a community college—they simply attend the one nearest their home. Similarly, there's not a lot of demand for articles about how best to play the applications game for such schools, because nearly any high school graduate can get into one.

Still, while there may not be a profit motive to scrutinize community colleges closely, there are several profound public reasons to do so. For one, community colleges now represent a huge slice of the higher education pie: 43 percent of college freshmen begin their education at two-year institutions.

Secondly, community colleges have taken on the toughest job in higher education: teaching lower-income students. In 1980, just 38 percent of recipients of a Pell Grant (the main federal need-based financial aid program) attended community colleges or other non-four-year institutions. By 2004, that percentage had leapt to 54 percent.

Thirdly, for a student of modest means hobbled by an inadequate high school education, or with a family to care for and a job to keep, the difference between good teaching and bad teaching can mean almost everything. Research shows that the brightest kids succeed regardless of whether they're taught poorly or well (one reason that many elite four-year schools succeed by doing little more than staying out of their students' way). Students with the lowest levels of academic preparation, however, are most sensitive to the quality of the learning environment. Unfortunately, the learning environment at these colleges is far from the best it could be. Only 18 percent of community college freshmen earn a degree or certificate within three years.

The fourth reason to keep a close eye on community colleges is that our economic future depends on how well they serve their students. Twenty years ago, community colleges were places for less academically inclined students to gain the credentials they needed for a decent job, or for workers driven out of manufacturing positions to retrain for emerging sectors like IT. Today, many of those sectors are experiencing brutal competition from abroad. For these workers to get ahead, and to be useful to American companies, merely training them in new

skills is no longer enough. They need to be able to learn continuously, to think critically, to adapt to a changing economy. In other words, we now need community colleges to impart the same kinds of sophisticated learning and thinking skills that have traditionally been the province of four-year colleges.

The final reason that it makes sense to rate community colleges is that it's possible to do so honestly. Guides to four-year schools like the one published by *U.S. News* rely on measures that are only glancingly related to actual learning, such as the percentage of alumni who donate money or the reputation a school has among administrators of other colleges. In part, *U.S. News* relies on such dubious criteria because four-year institutions refuse to release data on the quality of teaching at their schools.

Community colleges aren't so squeamish. They allow the publication of the results of a survey called the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, or CCSSE (available at www.ccsse.org). The survey tests colleges on how well they use teaching techniques that have been proven to lead to better learning, such as how often students collaborate with other students and interact with faculty. (See "Measuring What Matters," page 28.)

We've combined this groundbreaking analysis with data on graduation rates to compile the first-ever list of the thirty best community colleges in America (see below).

THE TOP 30 COMMUNITY COLLEGES

	STATE	ENROLLMENT	TUITION & FEES	ACTIVE & COLLABORATIVE LEARNING	STUDENT EFFORT	ACADEMIC CHALLENGE	STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION	SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS	GRAD RATE
1. Atlanta Technical College	GA	2202	$1362	62.5	59.1	56.6	57.6	63.0	35
2. Cascadia Community College	WA	1302	$2642	68.6	54.4	56.3	58.1	51.8	34
3. Southern University at Shreveport	LA	1921	$2252	67.4	59.6	59.3	59.0	62.6	17
4. Southwestern Community College	NC	1207	$1171	57.2	55.0	53.6	58.3	57.3	45
5. Hazard Community and Technical College	KY	2523	$2616	57.4	57.2	61.1	62.3	57.4	21
6. North Florida Community College	FL	806	$1910	52.8	51.5	53.4	58.5	60.9	44
7. Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College	WI	2223	$2912	58.6	52.0	49.8	55.4	49.2	54
8. Southeast Kentucky Comm. & Tech. College	KY	2719	$2760	55.9	55.2	54.6	58.3	61.2	28
9. Zane State College	OH	1375	$3849	57.0	54.3	54.4	55.2	58.0	31
10. Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College	GA	2635	$2098	52.7	56.8	56.8	61.7	59.8	25
11. Texas State Technical College-Marshall	TX	394	$3930	57.1	51.1	52.8	64.7	57.3	25
12. Lake City Community College	FL	1649	$2979	53.0	51.9	50.7	54.4	56.6	45
13. Itasca Community College	MN	981	$4590	57.5	53.9	50.6	51.7	53.7	38
14. South Piedmont Community College	NC	1111	$1319	57.6	52.1	51.1	54.6	54.4	33
15. Vermilion Community College	MN	612	$4366	62	53.8	51.8	57.6	47.2	24
16. Hawaii Community College	HI	1519	$1478	59.9	53.8	56.0	55.3	51.9	21
17. Ellsworth Community College	IA	675	$3108	54.7	51.0	46.6	54.4	52.9	44
18. Chipola College	FL	1516	$2137	50.0	51.6	54.0	52.0	52.0	52
19. Martin Community College	NC	619	$1302	56.3	53.8	52.7	59.0	53.4	24
20. Texas State Technical College-West Texas	TX	1125	$3105	55.6	51.1	49.4	52.1	56.6	35
21. South Texas College	TX	10249	$1996	59.5	57.0	55.4	53.7	60.7	10
22. Skagit Valley College	WA	3446	$2712	57.7	53.9	53.4	52.5	50.3	27
23. Valencia Community College	FL	17795	$2091	53.2	52.3	54.0	53.1	49.8	36
24. MiraCosta College	CA	5574	$590	56.4	52.6	52.2	54.4	51.6	29
25. Florida Community College at Jacksonville	FL	12685	$1714	57.8	51.9	49.9	52.9	50.1	32
26. New Hampshire Comm. and Tech. College	NH	1137	$5464	51.9	54.2	55.1	53.7	54	31
27. Frank Phillips College	TX	825	$2766	52.9	49.6	47.8	56.1	58	35
28. Mesabi Range Comm. and Tech. College	MN	1044	$4174	52.7	48.2	51	49.4	52.9	42
29. Northwest Vista College	TX	5243	$2292	63.5	54.7	50.9	56.1	52.8	10
30. New Mexico State University-Grants	NM	397	$1320	58.2	58.1	54.2	54.6	54.5	13

Our list busts many widely held myths about what community colleges are capable of and the inherent superiority of four-year schools. Here are some highlights:

STANDARDS & POOR

Conventional wisdom assumes that if you hold schools with low-income students to high standards, graduation rates will plummet. In fact, our list indicates that the opposite may be the case. CCSSE research has found that the level of academic challenge is positively linked with graduation rates. Indeed, the average graduation rate of colleges on our list is almost 50 percent higher than the national average for community colleges. Undergraduates who are taught well are more likely to succeed and ultimately complete their degree, meaning that the more colleges ask from their students, the more they get back. This suggests that many students aren't dropping out because colleges are keeping their standards appropriately high—they're dropping out because the standards are inappropriately low.

WHITEBOARD JUNGLE

Too often, administrators at community colleges hide behind the myth that it's unfair to expect much of schools that serve traditionally disadvantaged populations. Our results beg to differ. College number five, Kentucky's Hazard Community and Technical College—where 96 percent of students receive some form of need-based financial aid—tops hundreds of two- and four-year institutions in the measure of student-faculty interaction. At South Texas College, number twenty-one on our list, 95 percent of its 16,000 students are Hispanic, many of whom are first- and second-generation immigrants. (In fact, South Texas enrolls almost four times as many Hispanic undergraduates as the entire Ivy League.) South Texas scores particularly high on the "student effort" benchmark. Its students are more likely than most to prepare multiple drafts of assignments before turning them in, and to work on projects that require integrating information and ideas from various sources.

DON'T FOLLOW THE MONEY

Yet another prevalent myth in the world of higher education is that the more you spend, the better education you get. Indeed, *U.S. News* makes per-student funding the third-biggest factor in its rankings. But average per-student spending at the institutions on our list is virtually the same as spending at the typical community college, and tuition is actually lower than the average at other such schools. Needless to say, every college on our list spends a fraction of what a typical four-year college does. That doesn't mean community colleges couldn't use more money. But it's clear that the most expensive schools aren't necessarily those that teach students best. Exhibit A: Our number one school, Georgia's Atlanta Technical College, is an urban college attended predominantly by African Americans. Most of its students study part-time while working and tend to focus on work-oriented credentials in health care, construction, and mechanics. CCSSE results indicate that Atlanta Technical gives students a great education despite spending 30 percent less per student than the average community college.

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Pretty much everyone assumes that every four-year university, regardless of quality, rates above every community

TABLE 1

How often have you done the following (Never, Sometimes, Often, or Very Often)?	Percent who responded "Often" or "Very Often"		
	Top 30 community colleges	Average for community colleges	Average for freshmen at research-intensive doctoral universities
Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	67	64	50
Made a class presentation	36	28	21
Worked with other students on projects during class	54	45	39
Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, coworkers, etc.)	52	49	54
Received prompt feedback (written or oral) from instructors on your performance	59	56	49
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations	51	N/A	48
Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor	50	51	42
Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class	19	18	16

A Note on Methodology

Our methodology was designed to identify community colleges that excel in using teaching methods that researchers have linked to increased student achievement. We also wanted to identify colleges that are successful in helping students earn degrees. To that end, we relied on two sources: the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and graduation rate statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Education.

CCSSE administrators compile raw survey data into five composite benchmarks that gauge success in "Active and Collaborative Learning," "Student Effort," "Academic Challenge," "Student-Faculty Interaction," and "Support for Learners." The benchmark scores are standardized so that the average is fifty and one standard deviation (among individual student responses, not institutional averages) is twenty-five. All five benchmarks have been found to have a positive impact on student success. Some, however, were more strongly and consistently predictive than others. Accordingly, we gave more weight to the benchmarks with the strongest link to student learning and attainment—"Active and Collaborative Learning" received the strongest weight, followed by "Academic Challenge." Eighty-five percent of each college's rating is based on the unequally weighted benchmarks. Because many colleges don't administer the CCSSE every year, we combined results from the 2004, 2005, and 2006 survey years. If a college administered the survey more than once during that time, we used the most recent year.

The remaining 15 percent of the rating is based on federal graduation rates, which were also standardized so that no college's rate could exceed the average by more than two standard deviations. This measure tracks the percentage of students who earn a degree or credential within 150 percent of the expected time—three years for a two-year degree, for example. It understates the overall success of community colleges, since some students take longer than 150 percent of the expected time to graduate, while others transfer to four-year institutions without earning a community college degree. It also excludes part-time students. However, a recent study from the Community College Research Center, which is housed at the Columbia University Teachers College, found that while accounting for part-time students, extended time frames, and so on, substantially increases the *absolute* graduation rate for community colleges, it doesn't substantially change the position of institutions *relative to one another.*

This methodology is by no means definitive. Like all survey results, CCSSE measures have statistical margins of error. The list would be more accurate if it included factors not covered by the CCSSE, like how much student learning increases between enrollment and graduation at individual colleges, and how successful graduates are in the workforce and further education. But unlike the lists in the myriad guidebooks to four-year colleges that choke the shelves of newsstands and bookstores every year, this list is entirely based on measures with a research-proven link to student success—or, in the case of graduation rates, a measure of success itself.—*K.C.*

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

Irked by what they saw as flaws in *U.S. News*'s methodology for ranking colleges, a group of reformers in the late 1990s pioneered a new approach. With a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, a panel of educational experts set out to develop a way to quantify how well colleges actually *teach* their undergraduates. The result was the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), launched in 2000 and now in use at more than 600 four-year colleges and universities. Decades of research have demonstrated that certain teaching methods—those that actively engage students in the classroom—lead to greater student learning. By surveying a sample of students at each participating institution, the NSSE measures the prevalence of research-proven best practices. To measure high expectations, for example, the NSSE asks about the number of papers written, books assigned, and hours spent preparing for class. To gauge the level of student collaboration, the survey asks students how often they work together in and out of the classroom. To assess student engagement, the NSSE asks how often students make class presentations, work on community-based projects, and apply theories or concepts to practical problems.

The NSSE's founders hoped that participating universities would make this data public, creating new incentives for institutions to burnish their reputations through better teaching. But most schools chose to keep their survey results hidden, fearing that a low score would hurt their standing in the public eye.

An offshoot directed at community colleges, however, took a different course. Launched in 2002, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) polls a sample of students at participating institutions to evaluate the prevalence of research-proven best teaching practices; hundreds of colleges have since used the survey. Unlike their four-year counterparts, all of these schools have chosen to make their results public.

CCSSE measures "best practices," not learning outcomes. But a 2006 study, which compared students' responses to CCSSE questions with their GPAs (controlling for prior academic performance to isolate the importance of CCSSE factors), confirmed that these practices do in fact enhance student achievement. Survey questions used to measure "active and collaborative learning" showed the strongest relationship. In other words, the more students work together in and out of the classroom, the more they contribute to class discussions and participate in community-based projects, the greater their likelihood of getting good grades and earning a degree. These findings held true even after controlling for students' age, race, and gender.—*K.C.*

college. Yet the reality isn't so simple. We gathered the answers that students at the community colleges on our list gave to specific questions on the CCSSE survey. Then we compared the average results with the answers given to the same questions by students at research-intensive universities that participate in a similar study, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Table 1 on page 26 shows the surprising results of that comparison: on a number of important measures, the colleges on our list outperform their four-year peers. More than two-thirds of the community college students ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions, compared to only half of the four-year students. Student-faculty interaction is also better—the community college students are more likely to get prompt feedback on performance and to interact with their professors during and outside of class. And the level of academic challenge is more than comparable—the community college students were more likely to work harder than they thought they could to meet their professor's expectations. The first concern of the research university is, unsurprisingly, research. Community colleges, by contrast, are far more focused on teaching, and some are doing it better than even the most esteemed four-year institutions. (For more on the distinctive approach to teaching employed at Cascadia Community College, number two on our list, see "Built to Teach," page 29.)

What, then, are the conclusions to be drawn from our list? For community colleges, the main one is this: No more excuses. It's just not very credible to blame subpar performance on funding levels or student demographics when schools like Hazard and Atlanta Technical are performing so well.

For four-year universities, the conclusion is even tougher: They ought to be ashamed of themselves. Despite all their advantages—lavish campuses, brilliant scholars, social networks that no community college can match—the quality of the teaching at four-year institutions is less rigorous and less helpful than that found at the community colleges on our list. This is a stunning indictment of the extent to which teaching at many of America's "best" universities has been neglected.

The biggest lesson to be drawn from our list, however, is a hopeful one: Great teaching can happen anywhere. And if America is to succeed in the future, it needs to happen *everywhere*. It won't, however, unless pressure is brought to bear on recalcitrant college administrators and faculty—pressure from the politicians who write the rules and the students and parents who write the tuition checks. Consider our best community colleges guide a modest bid to generate that pressure. WM

Kevin Carey is the research and policy manager at Education Sector, an independent, nonpartisan think tank.